

## THE FARM LABOR MOVEMENT, THE STUDENT MOVEMENT, AND THE VITAL POINT OF "STYLE"

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When any population group enjoys less than full access to the values considered important by the larger society, we say that a social problem exists. Thus, if somebody's opportunity to choose an education, a candidate, a job, or a residence is curtailed, we say there is a civil rights problem. If somebody's opportunity to speak, worship, write, or assemble is curtailed, we say there is a civil liberties problem. If some group's income is chronically depressed by comparison with that of others, we say there is an economic problem.

When we say there is a "farm labor problem," what we are really saying, in a kind of verbal shorthand, is that agricultural workers enjoy less than full access to every one of the above social values, and more besides. The farm labor problem represents an unusual and perhaps unique confluence of almost all the social problems our society faces at the domestic (as distinguished from the international) level. The fact that farm workers tend to receive short shrift in all the values our society and culture deem worthwhile has led a number of persons to feel that one who wants to serve these values -- justice, security, freedom, whatever -- can serve more of them, better, and quicker, in the farm labor movement than in any other domestic problem area.

The "liberal" response to the farm labor problem is to try to do something to ease "the plight of the migrants" (although most farm workers are not migrants). Most characteristically, this response assumes the form of bills introduced at National or State levels, calling for child care centers, crew leader registration, migrant health and welfare programs, and so forth. The liberal response may also take the form of pressure upon administrative agencies involved: the California Department of Employment, U.S. Department of Labor, etc. Too, this response may assume the form of more direct action: community programs to "welcome the migrant"; clinics; free milk for migrant children; religious services; and the like.

The first hypothesis of the present paper is that the liberal response is inherently inadequate to the problem. This is not to assert that liberals are utterly unavailing when, for example, they write to their congressmen, assemblymen, and senators urging them to do something about the "plight of America's forgotten people"; or contribute a five dollar bill to one or another of the many committees to aid migrant workers. Let everyone do what his heredity or environment or combination thereof permits. It is certainly preferable that migrant tots have ointment to ease their sore fingernail beds, incurred picking cotton, than that they have none. But for two basic reasons it is here suggested that the liberal response can never be entirely adequate to the task of extending to agricultural workers full access to the values we profess.

(1) This approach fails to achieve necessary changes in the state of things, inasmuch as it fails to recognize the social forces which are responsible for the state of things, and inasmuch as it lacks the will and power to cope with them even if it did recognize them. There is something pathetic, for instance, in liberal organizations, year after year, exhorting their adherents to write to legislators about the bracero program, in view of the composition of the Congressional committees which annually pass on this program, and in view of the way the Congress is operated.

(2) Even if, somehow or other, it were possible for liberals, through legislative and administrative action, to confer upon farm workers a full share of the values our society can offer, this is not the way justice, security, and freedom ought to be secured. In order to ring true and lastingly, they must be won rather than conferred. Freedom, security, and justice imply human involvement and development, and men do not develop through having things done for them. Ultimately, they come into their own as human beings the hard way: by striving, by planning, by working together, by overcoming obstacles, by assuming responsibilities, by making difficult decisions, by choosing between difficult alternatives.

The only adequate response to the farm labor problem, in the long run, rests upon the assumption that farm workers are capable of assuming responsibilities, of making painful decisions, of demanding and obtaining values on their own behalf, rather than having these things done for them by an enlightened bureaucracy, by benevolent employers, or by a compassionate public. The proper response to the farm labor problem, by persons who are not themselves farm workers, is to assist in clearing away the obstacles which currently make it unnecessarily difficult for such workers to shoulder the burdens of self-help and maturity. This approach -- presupposing a faith that even the most disinherited of men have the capacity to forge a creative destiny of their own, given the opportunity -- is a "radical" approach (rather than a "liberal" one), as it is here suggested radicalism should properly be defined.

However, the legitimate role of students and other non-farm-workers in extending social values to this troubled field is not quite so passive as the above ~~stated~~ hypothesis might superficially suggest. For the question remains: how best to clear away the obstacles to self-help? And on the answer to this question a very great deal depends.



To a large extent, the entire future career of the farm labor movement depends upon the methods employed in the first, underbrush-clearing stage. This is the second major hypothesis of the present paper.

Not infrequently, when the disinherited of the earth grow aware of their disinherited state and find it intolerable, they seek their inheritance through reprisals and retribution against whomever they identify as responsible for their state. This style of seeking values almost invariably yields a spurious variety of the values sought -- justice, security, freedom, whatever -- or none at all. It almost invariably results in the substitution of some new form of repression for the old. With rare exceptions, a revolution (in its correct sense, of a complete turn) conceived in revenge and dedicated to violent propositions, can only be "consolidated" by techniques as violent as those by which it was launched. In the context of agricultural labor, by "violence" we do not mean the guillotine or the firing squad. But the dynamiting of bracero camps (whether planned or consummated); driving copper nails into fruit trees; putting sand in crankcases and water in gasoline tanks; threatening persons verbally: these are not different, qualitatively, from any and every other form of terror and violence, real or potential, carried out or merely contemplated.

Those who wish to serve social values in the farm labor field do not serve them well by supporting every manifestation of the farm labor movement, reflexively and indiscriminately. It is entirely conceivable that some arms of the movement may be destroying the very social values they claim to seek. Persons who would see the boundaries of social justice and freedom extended to embrace the agricultural workers of our country, owe it to their vision to find the answers to such questions as the following before they make a commitment to one or another specific farm labor campaign: operationally, what is its plan, its strategy, its pattern, its "style"? within that frame of reference, what techniques does it employ? What are the goals implicit in such strategy and such tactics? to what extent are farm workers themselves involved in the formulation of such strategy and such tactics? in carrying them out?

What is more, the discourse in which answers to such questions are sought, in order to yield its proper fruit, must be conducted fully, openly, and candidly, without fear of the consequences of revealing that quite different styles in fact exist. Rather than masking them under a lowest common denominator, let them compete in public view, and let the better style win in honest competition with all available alternatives. This is our third major hypothesis.

In a sense, non-farm-workers can influence the course of the movement in a direction toward rather than away from desired social values simply by withholding their support from efforts which are manipulative, terroristic, conspiratorial, destructive, or otherwise unacceptable at the vital point of style. But non-farm-workers can do much more. When they find a movement which proposes to assist farm workers gain their freedom and justice by means consonant with those ends, non-farm-workers interested in practical freedom and justice have an obligation to support such a movement, in whatever ways are also consonant with those goals.

Let us assume, for example, that students at Sacramento State decide, upon the basis of personal investigation, that the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee is a responsible, honest, decent, democratic expression of the farm labor movement. There are any number of ways these students could assist the AWOC directly. For example, by their own contributions, or by the systematic solicitation of contributions from others, students could help AWOC pay the rent currently due on its several offices. If successful in this short-run goal of keeping AWOC's doors open in the literal sense, students could then be of equally direct assistance in AWOC's day-to-day functions: the typing, mimeographic, and distribution of leaflets, for example. Since AWOC will be operating largely on a volunteer basis during the proximate future, these sorts of tasks, if they are to be performed at all, will have to be performed by persons willing to donate their writing, speaking, secretarial, or other skills.

Let us assume that students at UCLA, or some other college or university, feel they are too remote geographically to aid AWOC in such ways as these. Or let us assume that students on some campus conclude that AWOC, for one reason or another, in one respect or another, is deficient at the vital point of style. Several alternative responses to the farm labor problem remain.

(1) Students have the opportunity to choose from among a number of other organizing efforts, representing a very broad spectrum of styles, ranging from the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, Chauffeurs, Warehousemen, and Helpers at one end, to the Community Service Organization and AFSC at the other.

(2) Some may wish to "reform" existing organizations from the inside, by presenting alternative proposals for strategy and tactics, and securing their adoption by democratic procedures.

(3) Students might prefer to maintain an independence of ideology and action impossible within the framework of any existing organization. There is no ineluctable reason why they could not and should not develop their own program for helping farm



workers help themselves in the quest for freedom and justice. Students from Berkeley and elsewhere, as a matter of fact, did precisely this last summer. Students from several campuses are doing so again as these lines are written.

(4) Some, of course, may reject the hypotheses advanced in this paper.

(a) They may engage in "liberal" activities of the sorts discussed at the outset.

(b) They may engage in the types of "political action" which have come to be associated generally with the "student movement": agitation, picketing, pamphleteering.

(c) They may engage in activities which, while more constructive than agitation for its own sake (e.g., "self-education," "community education"), are similarly weak in dealing with the basic hypotheses involved: that means are as important as ends; that both should be scrupulously explored, articulated, and understood by all concerned; that social values are not secured for people, but by people, perhaps with the advice and assistance, but not with the direction of others.

(d) There is a real possibility students will approach the farm labor problem as they have a number of others: with an "issues orientation" which evades rather than openly rejects the foregoing hypotheses. This approach boggles at no combination of the foregoing half-dozen approaches, whatever the flavor or style -- or lack of same -- of the resulting potpourri. The issues orientation says, in effect, that it does not matter whether one is liberal or radical (as here defined), committed to democracy or coercion, committed to violence or non-violence. What is more, within this orientation, attempts to discuss the intrinsic differences between irreconcilable points of view are considered "divisive" and "irrelevant." All that matters is that one be willing to pass out leaflets in front of the nearest Safeway store, or the equivalent.

To the extent that it places its communicants at the disposal of an ongoing movement which has grappled successfully with the sorts of hypotheses suggested here, and has worked out some consistent and constructive set of ends and means, the issues orientation can assist in the accomplishment of consistent and constructive things. This is the case with the Freedom Ride and Fayette-Haywood civil rights campaigns, for example. On the other hand, where and when the issues orientation moves into an ideologically unstructured problem area, by its self-imposed proscriptions it is absolutely unable to deal with the ends-means and related problems, and boxes itself into exceedingly narrow and usually negative forms of activity. The farm labor movement is, for the moment, relatively unstructured. In terms of the root problems of agricultural workers, the activities permissible within an issues orientation are essentially frivolous. There is no harm, certainly, in distributing flyers to supermarket shoppers, pointing out the conditions under which their fruits and vegetables were produced. But the connection between this and the building of a viable farm workers' organization is not readily apparent. The handbilling of supermarkets has the virtue of being "safe", since it does not require answers to the "ideological" questions: "what are we for?" and "why?"

A truly radical approach, however -- i.e., meaningful assistance to farm workers in their attempts to organize themselves for the lasting solution of their own problems -- is very "unsafe" to the issues orientation. The radical approach, as we have here used the phrase, does not permit continued evasion of the important questions: what kind of organization; by what methods; for what objectives; and so forth.

(5) A final possibility is open to the "student movement" when and if it confronts the farm labor problem, and must decide on some response to that problem. It may find the nettles implied here too painful to grasp, and make no response at all. It is a great deal easier to talk about civil rights in ways which do not require the making of hard choices. It is a great deal easier to talk about civil liberties in ways which do not require anyone to say what he really has in mind. It is a great deal easier to operate always at the surface and thus to avoid the uncomfortable revelation that the faithful are actually working for inconsistent or even opposite ends. It is a great deal easier to inveigh against the things which are wrong with society than to remold it nearer to the heart's desire. It is a great deal easier to be reactive than it is to be radical.

Whatever the response among students to the fact farm workers are denied access to almost every significant social value -- or whatever students' lack of response -- the farm labor movement will go on. Insecurity, injustice, and unfreedom, particularly in the very midst of relatively greater security, justice, and freedom, cannot indefinitely endure, so long as man is what he is.

It is to be hoped that a few students will leave their sandboxes -- whether conservative, liberal, or reactive -- in favor of an authentically radical response to the farm labor problem, as well as the many other social problems we all confront, ranging from the abolition of capital punishment, to war vs. world government. This is to say, one hopes a few students will come to firm grips with the root issues implicit in the



farm labor (or any other) movement. We have here tentatively set forth some of those issues in the form of a few hypotheses.

One may hope, finally, that having wrestled successfully with the root issues involved, ~~that~~ a few students will bring to the farm labor movement their conclusions in terms of utopia, and actions appropriate to the realization of that vision. The farm labor movement, like any other, stands in need of such propositions to history.

Although this paper is addressed primarily to a student audience, if any of the things said here are valid, they are valid to the same extent for other audiences of bystanders. There are times (Milton would surely agree) when they do not serve who only stand and wait. And yet, to serve -- to act -- is not enough, either. Action without thought is likely as null and sterile as thought without action, in the dispassionate curve of history.

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